ROBERT BROWNING

EDMUND GOSSE

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EPILOGUE

ROBERT BROWNING.

Personalia

BY

EDMUND GOSSE

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PREFACE

It would not have occurred to me that it was worth while to give a lasting form to the notes which are here reprinted. But I am assured by those who are peculiarly well fitted to know what is required by the readers of Browning that there is constant inquiry for the number of *The Century Magazine* (December, 1881) in which they appeared, and I am bound to confess that I am frequently written to by strangers who ask me to tell them where they can meet with the remarks in question. I have been, in consequence, requested by the poet's American publishers to allow the appended reprint to be made; and the fact is that there is so

much of it which is Mr. Browning's, and so little which is mine, that I have felt it would be mock-modesty to refuse my consent. "The Early Career of Robert Browning" was inspired and partly dictated, was revised and was approved of, by himself. It is here put forth, with great diffidence, not as having any final importance, but as a contribution towards that biography of the great poet which must one of these days be written. The author of that life will, I cannot but hope, turn to these pages with some curiosity, and perhaps, until his work is accomplished and this small star buried in his sun, readers and lovers of Browning may be glad to see what events in his early career seemed notable to the poet himself. With this modest purpose, and no other, I have permitted these personal notes to be redeemed from the pages of an old magazine.

It has been suggested to me that I ought to explain the circumstances under which these data were collected. Ten years ago, it will be recollected, although Mr. Browning was recognized as a great poet, he had not yet excited that degree of personal curiosity which soon afterwards began to be awakened. The facts of his biography were put before the public in the most rudimentary form. The year of his birth was seldom given correctly; the month and day had, I think, never been made known. At that time I had the happiness of seeing him very frequently; for twelve years, I may perhaps mention, I was his close neighbor. I had several times ventured to point out to him how valuable would be some authentic account of his life, but he had always put the suggestion from him. I had ceased to hope that he would ever break through

his reserve, when one morning in February, 1881, he sent round a note to me, saying, "Come; and I will do what you wish." I went, and found him visibly annoyed by an account of his life, mainly fabulous, which the post had brought him. He said, "If you still wish to take down some notes of my life, I am willing to give you all the help I can; I am tired of this tangle of facts and fancies." It was agreed that we should dedicate some hours in the morning, once a week, to this delightful task, and for about a month, at stated intervals, for a couple of hours at a time, I sat at his study table, while he perambulated, and I jotted rapidly down the notes of his conversation. At his suggestion, I came each morning provided with a schedule of questions, one of which I would read, and then let him weave the embroidery of his answer

in whatever way he chose, until information languished, when I would put another question to him. At last I had collected a great mass of facts, gossip, and opinion, which I put into some rough order, and submitted to him. He marked for omission all that his maturer judgment did not wish to preserve. What was rejected was, much of it, of extreme interest, but he asked me to destroy it all, and of course I loyally did so. I then cast in literary form what he determined to let pass, and the article proceeded to America.

It appeared in the December number of *The Century Magazine*, and my little record would be incomplete if I did not publish, among my *pièces justificatives*, the note which Mr. Browning left at my door with his own hand, as soon as he had read the article in its published form: —

19 Warwick Crescent, W.
December 4, 1881.

My dear Gosse, — What am I to say, or try to say? Your goodness and generosity there can be no doubt concerning; if any reproach to your judgment happen on account of all this partiality and praise, your goodness and generosity must bear it as well as they can. I wish yourself, when the years come, may find such an appreciator. You will at least deserve such an one — I hope and fear — better than does

Your affectionate Friend,
Robert Browning.

That this volume may make some pretense to be a book, — lest, as Gray said of his poems, "this work should be mistaken for the works of a flea or a pismire," — I have added to it some slight recollections of the personal characteristics of our illustrious friend, contributed to *The New Review* for Janu-

ary, 1890. If such notes as these are to have any permanent value, they must be recorded before the imagination has had time to play tricks with the memory. Such as they are, I am sure they are faithful to-day; to-morrow I should be sure of nothing.

EDMUND GOSSE.

March, 1890.

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THE EARLY CAREER OF ROBERT BROWNING

THE EARLY CAREER OF ROBERT BROWNING.

1812–1846.

It is not my design in the following pages to attempt any exact review or any minute analysis of the writings of one of the most copious and versatile of modern poets. The range of Mr. Browning's genius is so wide, the temper of his muse so Shakesperean and universal, that he will probably exhaust the critical powers of a great many students of literature before he finally takes his right place among the chief authors of modern Europe. The constellation which is still ascending our poetical heavens is too much confused as yet by those mists of personal preju-

dice and meteors of temporary success which always lurk about the horizon of the Present to enable us to map the stars in it with certainty. Many attempts, of course, have been made, and some with a great measure of success. Two such studies, among others, demand recognition for their extent and authority, — the volume on Mr. Browning's poetry by Mr. John Nettleship, since known as an animal-painter, and the elaborate criticism printed in *The Century Magazine* by Mr. E. C. Stedman. I shall not attempt to compete with these or any similar reviews; my purpose is to touch lightly on those early volumes of Mr. Browning which are comparatively less known to his admirers, and to enrich such bibliographical notes as I have been able to put together with a variety of personal anecdotes and historical facts which now for the first

time see the light, and which I have jotted down, from time to time, from Mr. Browning's lips, and with his entire consent and kindly coöperation. No one is more alive than Mr. Browning, or, may I add, than I, to the indelicacy of the efforts now only too frequently made to pry into the private affairs of a man of genius, to peep over his shoulder as he writes to his intimate friends, and to follow him like a detective through the incidents of a life which should not be less sacred from curiosity than the life of his butler or his baker. The poet has expressed his mind with extreme plainness:

"A peep through my window, if folks prefer;
But, please you, no foot over threshold of mine."

But literary history, the most charming of all occupations of the human mind, as Warburton said, is a very different thing from personal history, and

there are certain facts about the development of a poet's intellect and the direction that it took, the welcomes that it received and the reverses that it endured, about which curiosity is perfectly legitimate. For those who desire such a peep through Mr. Browning's window as this, the shutters are at last by his own courtesy taken down.

Mr. Robert Browning was born at Camberwell, a southern suburb of London, on the 7th of May, 1812. His father, who bore the same name as himself, and who died in 1866 at the age of eighty-four, was in many ways a remarkable man. It is, we must suppose, not merely filial piety that makes his son declare that his father had more true poetic genius than he has. Of course the world at large will answer, "By their fruits shall ye know them," and of palpable fruit in the way of

published verse the elder Mr. Browning has nothing to show. But it seems that his force and fluency in the use of the heroic couplet, the only metrical form for which he had much taste, were extraordinary; and his son speaks of his moral vein as that of a Pope born out of due time. For his son's poetic gods he had, of course, no fondness, and, from the very first, the two minds diverged upon every intellectual point, — until the close of the old gentleman's life, when it is pathetic to hear that he learned, as the world was learning, to appreciate the fine flavor of his son's poetry. He was always, however, loving and sympathetic, divining the genuine poetic impulse though blind to the beauty of the forms it took, and in this one case the rare phenomenon seems to have appeared of a boy consciously, and of set purpose, trained to be a poet.

The only other instance that occurs to me is that of Jean Chapelain, who was set apart from birth by his parents "to relight the torch of Malherbe;" the result was not nearly so happy as in the case of Mr. Browning.

The latter, however, can hardly remember a time when his intention was not to be eminent in rhyme, and he began to write at least as early as Cowley. His sister remembers him, as a very little boy, walking round and round the dining-room table, and spanning out the scansion of his verses with his hand on the smooth mahogany. When he was about eight years old, this ambitious young person disdained the narrow field of poetry, and, while retaining that sceptre, debated within himself, as Dryden says Anne Killegrew did, whether he should invade and conquer the province of painting or that of music.

language and tenuity of thought, concealed by metrical audacity. But about a year after this, an event revolutionized Robert Browning's whole conception of poetic art. There came into his hands a miserable pirated edition of part of Shelley's works; the window was dull, but he looked through it into an enchanted garden. He was impatient to walk there himself, but, in 1825, it was by no means easy to obtain the books of Shelley. No bookseller that was applied to knew the name, although Shelley had been dead three years. At last, inquiry was made of the editor of the *Literary Gazette*, and it was replied that the books in question could be obtained of C. & J. Ollier, of Vere street.

To Vere street, accordingly, Mrs. Browning proceeded, and brought back as a present for her son, not only all the

works of Shelley, but three volumes written by a Mr. John Keats, which were recommended to her as being very much in the spirit of Mr. Shelley. A bibliophile of to-day is almost dazed in thinking of the prize which the unconscious lady brought back with her to Camberwell. There was the Pisa *Adonais*, in its purple paper cover; there was *Epipsychidion*, — in short, all the books she bought were still in their first edition, except *The Cenci*, which professed to be in the second. Poets of our own day need not grumble at the indifference of the public, when we see that within human memory two of the greatest writers of modern times, three and four years after their decease, were still utterly unsalable. Well, the dust of the dead Keats and Shelley turned to flower-seed in the brain of the young poet, and very soon wrought a change

in the whole of his ambition. First of all, they made him thoroughly dissatisfied with what he had hitherto written; and showed him — always a very salutary lesson for a boy — that the elements of his art were still to be learned. Meanwhile, the business of ordinary education took up the main part of his time; till 1826, he was at school at Dulwich, then with a tutor at home, and finally, but only for a very short time, at London University.

The elder Mr. Browning had but two children, — the poet, and a daughter who kept house for her brother in his closing years. When the son had arrived at that age at which the bias or opportunity of parents usually dictates a profession to a youth, Mr. Browning asked his son what he intended to be. It was known to the latter that his sister was provided for, and that there would always be

enough to keep him also, and he had the singular courage to decline to be rich. He appealed to his father whether it would not be better for him to see life in the best sense, and cultivate the powers of his mind, than to shackle himself in the very outset of his career by a laborious training, foreign to that aim. The wisdom or unwisdom of such a step is proved by its measure of success. In the case of Mr. Browning the determination has never been regretted, and so great was the confidence of the father in the genius of the son that the former at once acquiesced in the proposal. At this time, young Browning's brain was full of colossal schemes of poems. It is interesting and curious to learn that at a time of life when almost every poet, whatever his ultimate destination, is trying his power of wing in song, Mr. Browning, the early Byronic

lilt having been thrown aside, did not attempt any lyrical exercise. He planned a series of monodramatic epics, narratives of the life of typical souls, — a gigantic scheme at which a Victor Hugo or a Lope de Vega would start back aghast.

Several of these great poems were sketched; only one exists, and that in fragmentary form. At Richmond, whither the family had gone to live, — on the 22d of October, 1832, — Mr. Browning finished a poem which he named, from the object, not the subject, *Pauline*. This piece was read and admired at home, and one day his aunt said to the young man: —

"I hear, Robert, that you have written a poem; here is the money to print it."

Accordingly, in January, 1833, there went to press, anonymously, a little

book of seventy pages, which remained virtually unrecognized until the author, to preserve it from piracy, unwillingly received it among the acknowledged children of his muse, in 1867.

But, although *Pauline* was excluded from recognition by its author for more than thirty years, he has to confess that its production was attended with circumstances of no little importance to him. It was the intention and desire of Mr. Browning that the authorship should remain entirely unknown, but Miss Flower told the secret to Mr. Fox, who reviewed the poem with great warmth and fullness in the *Monthly Repository*. But a more curious incident was that a copy fell into the hands of John Stuart Mill, who was only six years the senior of the poet. It delighted him in the highest degree, and he immediately wrote to the editor of

Tait's Magazine, the only periodical in which he was at that time free to express himself, for leave to review *Pauline* at length. The reply was that nothing would have been more welcome, but that, unfortunately, in the preceding number the poem had been dismissed with one line of contemptuous neglect. Mr. Mill's opportunities extended no further than this one magazine, but at his death there came into Mr. Browning's possession this identical copy, the blank pages of which were crowded with Mill's annotations and remarks. The late John Forster took such an interest in this volume that he borrowed it, — "convey, the wise it call," — and when he died, it passed with his library into the possession of the South Kensington Museum, where the curious relic of the youth of two eminent men has at last found a rest-

ing-place. Nor was this the only instance in which the poem, despite its anonymity and its rawness, touched a kindred chord in a man of genius. There was much in it that was new, forcible, and fine,—such passages of description as this of the wood where Pauline and her lover met:—

"Walled in with a sloped mound of matted shrubs,
Dark, tangled, old and green, still sloping down
To a small pool whose waters lie asleep
Amid the trailing boughs turned water-plants;
And tall trees overarch to keep us in,
Breaking the sunbeams into emerald shafts,
And in the dreamy water one small group
Of two or three strange trees are got together,
Wondering at all around, as strange beasts herd
Together far from their own land: all wildness,
No turf nor moss, for boughs and plants pave all,
And tongues of bank go shelving in the lymph,
Where the pale-throated snake reclines his head,
And old gray stones lie making eddies there,
The wild mice cross them dry-shod: deeper in!
Shut thy soft eyes — now look — still deeper in!
This is the very heart of the woods, all round

Mountain-like heaped above us; yet even here
One pond of water gleams; far off the river
Sweeps like a sea, barred out from land; but one —
One thin clear sheet has overleaped and wound
Into this silent depth, which gained, it lies
Still, as but let by sufferance; *the trees bend*
O'er it as wild men watch a sleeping girl," —

or such fine bursts of versification as this about Andromeda: —

"As she awaits the snake on the wet beach,
By the dark rock and the white wave just breaking,
At her feet; quite naked and alone; a thing
You doubt not, fear not for, secure that God
Will come in thunder from the stars to save her."

Such beauties as these were not likely to escape the notice of curious lovers of poetry. Many years after, when Mr. Browning was living in Florence, he received a letter from a young painter whose name was quite unknown to him, asking him whether he were the author of a poem called *Pauline*, which was somewhat in his manner, and which the

writer had so greatly admired, that he had transcribed the whole of it in the British Museum reading-room. The letter was signed D. G. Rossetti, and thus began Mr. Browning's acquaintance with this eminent man. But to the world at large *Pauline* was a sealed book, by nobody, and the reviewers simply ignored it.

One very creditable exception was the *Athenæum*, then in its infancy, which dedicated several columns to a kindly, if not very profound, analysis, and to copious quotations. Mr. Browning discovered long afterward that this notice was written by Allan Cunningham.

After the publication of *Pauline* there came a period of respite, in which the poetical ferment of the young writer's mind was settling down, and his genius was preparing to take its proper

form. The scheme of illustrating, in a series of vast biographies in blank verse, whatever was unusual or tragical in the history of a soul, was gradually abandoned, and the excitement of travel took the place of the excitement of composition. Mr. Browning set out upon his *Wanderjahr*, 1834, and made a long stay at St. Petersburg. Of all that was thought and planned in these two years preceding the rapid authorship of *Paracelsus*, the only specimen remaining is to be found in four interesting lyrics included in the *Dramatic Lyrics* of 1842, and now finally relegated to *Men and Women*. Two of these were printed first in Fox's *Monthly Repository*, under the single title of "Madhouse Cells," although they are now known to every reader of Mr. Browning as "Joannes Agricola in Meditation" and "Porphyria's Lover." It is a curi-

pus matter for reflection that two poems so unique in their construction and conception, so modern, so interesting, so new, could be printed without attracting attention, so far as it would appear, from any living creature. Mr. Browning's other contributions to the *Monthly Repository* were the song, now inserted in *Pippa Passes*, beginning: —

> "A King lived long ago,
> In the morning of the world,
> When earth was nigher heaven than now,"

and the following sonnet,[1] which has not been reprinted in any edition of the poet's works: —

> "Eyes, calm beside thee (Lady couldst thou know!),
> May turn away thick with fastgathering tears:
> I glance not where all gaze: thrilling and low
> Their passionate praises reach thee — my cheek wears

[1] I owe the identification of this sonnet, which Mr. Browning had forgotten, to Mrs. Bridell-Fox.

Alone no wonder when thou passest by;
Thy tremulous lids, bent and suffused, reply
To the irrepressible homage which doth glow
On every lip but mine: if in thine ears
Their accents linger — and thou dost recall
'Me as I stood, still, guarded, very pale,
Beside each votarist whose lighted brow
Wore worship like an aureole, 'O'er them all
My beauty,' thou wilt murmur, 'did prevail
Save that one only': — Lady, couldst thou
know!"

August 17, 1834.

Here was a poet with a fresh voice, appealing to the intellectual youth of Europe in a direct way, such as only one other man had dreamed of, and that was Heine.

Then came *Paracelsus*, written in London through the winter of 1834, finished in March, 1835, and published before the summer. This work has had so many admirers that it needs, perhaps, a little courage to say that it was surely not so important as a sign of its

author's genius as the little pieces just mentioned. It is a drama of a shapeless kind, parent in this sort of a monstrous family of *Festuses*, and *Balders*, and *Wife Dramas*, only quite lately extirpated, and never any more, it is hoped, to flourish above ground. There are four persons in the drama: Paracelsus, the male and female genii of his career; Festus and Michal, friend and lover; and finally Aprile, the foil and counterpoise to his ambitious gravity. Every one knows how the poem is conducted; how full it is of subtlety, of melody, of eloquent and casuistical intelligence. But we cannot forget that it is a drama in which one of the characters, more than once, expresses himself in upward of three hundred lines of unbroken soliloquy. The precedent was bad, as all disregard of the canons of artistic form is apt to be; and in the hands of

his imitators Mr. Browning must often have shuddered at his own contorted reflection. The public refused to have anything to say to so strange a poem; very few copies were sold, and the reviews were contemptuously adverse. The *Athenæum*, even, which had received *Pauline* so warmly, dismissed *Paracelsus* with a warning to the author that it was useless to reproduce the obscurity of Shelley minus his poetic beauty.

But certain finer minds here and there recognized the treasury of power and genius concealed in this crabbed shape. The *Examiner*, in particular, contained a review of the poem at great length, in which full justice was done to Mr. Browning's genius. This, again, was the commencement of a memorable intimacy. But in the meantime the young poet formed the acquaintance of one

of the most striking personages of that generation — Macready, the tragedian. This happened at a dinner at the house of W. J. Fox, on the 27th of November, 1835. The actor was exceedingly charmed with the young and ardent writer, who, he said, looked more like a poet than any man he had ever met. He read *Paracelsus* with a sort of ecstasy, and cultivated Mr. Browning's acquaintance on every occasion. He asked him to spend New Year's Day with him at his country-house at Elstree, and on the last day of 1835, Mr. Browning found himself at "The Blue Posts" waiting for the coach, in company with two or three other persons, who looked at him with curiosity. One of these, a tall, ardent, noticeable young fellow, constantly caught his eye, but as the strangers knew one another, and as Mr. Browning knew none of

them, no conversation passed as they drove northward. It turned out that they were all Macready's guests, one of the elder men being George Cattermole, while the noticeable youth was no other than John Forster. He, on being introduced to Mr. Browning, said: "Did you see a little notice of you I wrote in the *Examiner?* The friendship so begun lasted, with a certain interval, until the end of Forster's life.

The acquaintance with Macready deepened rapidly on both sides. The actor had scarcely finished reading *Paracelsus* before he began to think that here was a tragic poet to his mind. He suggested that Mr. Browning should write him an acting play, and the subject of Narses, the eunuch who conquered Italy for Justinian, was discussed between them. At first the actor seemed more eager in the matter than the poet.

Early in 1836, Macready made this striking entry in his journal: —

"Browning said that I had *hit* him by my performance of *Othello*, and I told him I hoped I should make the blood come. It would, indeed, be some recompense for the miseries, the humiliations, the heart-sickening disgusts which I have endured in my profession, if, by its exercise, I had awakened a spirit of poetry whose influence would elevate, ennoble, and adorn our degraded drama. May it be!"

In April, 1836, the miseries to which Macready referred, and which were caused by the meanness of his manager and the bad state of the law of contract, were suddenly brought to a culmination. One evening, after playing part of *Richard II.*, and being forbidden to conclude the tragedy, Macready's patience suddenly failed him, and he inflicted upon the notorious and ridiculous Mr.

Alfred Bunn a sound thrashing. Notwithstanding this unfortunate *contre-temps*, to which Mr. Macready's chivalrous ideal gave more importance in his own eyes than was felt by an indulgent and scandal-loving public, it was possible, as early as May 26th, 1836, to bring out at Covent Garden Theatre, under the management of Mr. Osbaldiston, Talfourd's new tragedy of *Ion*. The supper which succeeded the first performance of this extremely successful play was a momentous occasion to Mr. Browning. He found himself seated opposite to Macready, who was supported on his right hand and his left by two elderly gentlemen, in whom the young poet recognized for the first time William Wordsworth and Walter Savage Landor. In the course of the evening Talfourd, with marked kindness, proposed the name of the youngest

English poet, and Wordsworth, leaning across the table, said, with august affability, "I am proud to drink your health, Mr. Browning!" The latter saw much of Wordsworth during the next few years, for Talfourd invited him to his house whenever Wordsworth came up to town. He listened to his slow talk with reverence and interest, but never got over the somewhat chilling and awful personal bearing of the old man. With Landor, on the contrary, Mr. Browning afterward became, as readers of Forster's life must be aware, extremely intimate, and helped, indeed, to add sunshine to the last dark days of that leonine exile. To return, however, to the "Ion" supper: the success of that tragedy had whetted the appetite of all the luckless playwrights of the day, and one of them, Miss Mitford, with pert audacity, ventured to

propose a poetic play to the tragedian while he was at table. But she utterly failed in her ruse, and Mr. Browning was, therefore, doubly surprised when, as the guests were leaving, Macready came behind him on the stairs, and, laying his hand on his arm, said, "Write a play, Browning, and keep me from going to America!" It was said so earnestly that there could be no doubt that it was meant, and Mr. Browning simply replied, "Shall it be historical and English? What do you say to a drama on Strafford?" In this rapid interchange of sympathies Mr. Browning's next work was conceived, but it was several months before he satisfied himself that he was sufficiently read in the historical part of the subject to fill up the plot. On the 19th of November, 1836, the tragedy of *Strafford* was brought, almost finished, to Macready;

in March of the next year it was completed and put in rehearsal, and, on the first of May, it was brought out on the boards of Covent Garden Theatre.

It is time now to deny a statement that has been repeated *ad nauseam* in every notice that professes to give an account of Mr. Browning's career. Whatever is said or not said, it is always remarked that his plays have "failed" on the stage. In point of fact, the three plays which he has brought out have all succeeded, and have owed it to fortuitous circumstances that their tenure on the boards has been comparatively short. *Strafford* was produced when the finances of Covent Garden Theatre were at their lowest ebb, and nothing was done to give dignity or splendor to the performance. "Not a rag for the new tragedy," said Mr. Osbaldiston. The king was taken by Mr. Dale, who

was stone-deaf, and who acted so badly that, as one of the critics said, it was a pity that the pit did not rise as one man and push him off the stage. All sorts of alterations were made in the text; where the poet spoke of "grave gray eyes," the manager corrected it in rehearsal to "black eyes." But at last Macready appeared, in the second scene of the second act, in more than his wonted majesty, crossing and recrossing the stage like one of Vandyke's courtly personages come to life again, and Miss Helen Faucit threw such tenderness and passion into the part of Lady Carlisle as surpassed all that she had previously displayed of histrionic power. Under these circumstances, and in spite of the dull acting of Vandenhoff, who played Pym without any care or interest, the play was well received on the first night, and on the second

night was applauded with enthusiasm by a crowded house. There was every expectation that the tragedy would have no less favorable a "run" than *Ion* had enjoyed, but after five nights, Vandenhoff suddenly withdrew, and though Elton volunteered to take his place, the financial condition of the theatre, in spite of the undiminished popularity of the piece, put an end to its representation.

Mr. Browning, the elder, had paid for the cost of *Paracelsus; Strafford* was taken by Longmans, and brought out, at their expense, as a little volume, — not, like most of the tragedies of the day, in dark-gray paper covers, with a white label. However, at that time the public absolutely declined to buy Mr. Browning's books, and *Strafford*, although more respectfully received by the press, was as great a financial failure as *Paracelsus*. It was part of Mr.

Browning's essentially masculine order of mind to be in no wise disheartened or detached from his purpose by this indifference of the public. He was silent for three years, but all the time busy with copious production. The success of *Strafford* on the stage led Mr. Browning's thoughts very naturally to the drama, and besides the purely lyrical masque or "proverb" of *Pippa Passes*, he concluded, before 1840, two tragedies with the intention of seeing them acted. These were *King Victor and King Charles*, and *Mansoor the Hierophant*, rebaptized on publication by the name of *The Return of the Druses*. These plays, however, found no manager or publisher willing to accept them, and the author fell back on the dream that he had commenced his career with, namely, that of chronicling in poetry the whole life of a single soul. He set

to work, and produced one of the most considerable, certainly one of the most characteristic, of his works, in the epic of *Sordello*, begun in 1838, finished and printed in 1840. It is scarcely necessary to remark that for forty years this book has been an eminent stumbling-block, not merely in the path of fools, but in that of very sensible and cultivated people. "The entirely unintelligible *Sordello*" has enjoyed at least its due share of obloquy and neglect. There are not a few of Mr Browning's readers who would miss it from the collection of his books more than any other of his longer poems. It possesses passages of melody and insight, fresh enough, surprising enough to form the whole stock-in-trade of a respectable poet; it needs reading three times, but on the third even a school-boy of tolerable intelligence will find it luminous,

if not entirely lucid, and half the charge of obscurity is really a confession of indolence and inattention.

"Who wills may hear 'Sordello's' story told,"

and if our space to-day would give us leave to roam through its fragrant pages, we might find a thousand reasons why *Sordello* ought to be one of the most readable of books.

And yet the Naddos of contemporary criticism were not wholly wrong. The book is difficult, and Mr. Browning in the philosophic afternoon of life frankly confesses as much. It is hard reading, over-condensed, over-rapid, like much of Milton in its too arrogant contempt for the commonplace habits of the intelligence. This is the author's explanation of his error, for that it was an error he is perhaps more ready than some of his admirers to admit. In 1838, the con-

dition of English poetry was singularly tame and namby-pamby. Tennyson's voice was only heard by a few. The many delighted in poor "L. E. L.," whose sentimental "golden violets" and gushing *improvvisatores* had found a tragic close at Cape Coast Castle. Among living poets, the most popular were good old James Montgomery, droning on at his hopeless insipidities and graceful "goodnesses," the Hon. Mrs. Norton, a sort of soda-water Byron, and poor, rambling T. K. Harvey. The plague of annuals and books of beauty was on the land, with its accompanying flood of verses by Alaric A. Watts and "Delta" Moir. These virtuous and now almost forgotten poetasters, had brought the art of poetry into such discredit, with their puerilities and their thin, diluted sentiment, that verse was beginning to be considered unworthy of

exercise by a serious or original thinker. Into this ocean of thin soup Mr. Browning threw his small square of solid pemmican, — a little mass which could have supplied ideas and images to a dozen "L. E. L.'s" without losing much of its consistence. Of course, to a generation long fed on such thin diet, the new contribution seemed much more like a stone than like anything edible, and even to this day there are lovers of poetry who can get as little out of it as Alton Locke could. About 1863, Mr. Browning, becoming a little impatient of the long-repeated denigration of his favorite offspring, set about rewriting *Sordello* on a simpler principle; needless to say that was a failure, and there are few who will regret that for once, at least, so profound a student of the human heart wrote rather as he himself felt than as his readers, even the most

sympathetic of them, might have wished. The book has become a classic, and to each coming generation will in all probability present less difficulty than to the preceding one.

But from the popular point of view *Sordello* was a failure, and in the face of so much poetry still unprinted, Mr. Browning could not but ruefully remember how expensive his books had been to his sympathetic and uncomplaining father. To go on indefinitely in this way was scarcely to be thought of, and yet poetry kept in a desk, on the Horatian principle, is a property that wears out the soul with hope deferred. One day, as the poet was discussing the matter with Mr. Edward Moxon, the publisher, the latter remarked that at that time he was bringing out some editions of the old Elizabethan dramatists in a comparatively cheap form, and that if

Mr. Browning would consent to print his poems as pamphlets, using this cheap type; the expense would be very inconsiderable. The poet jumped at the idea, and it was agreed that each poem should form a separate brochure of just one sheet, — sixteen pages, in double columns, — the entire cost of which should not exceed twelve or fifteen pounds. In this fashion began the celebrated series of *Bells and Pomegranates*, eight numbers of which, a perfect treasury of fine poetry, came out successively between 1841 and 1846. *Pippa Passes* led the way, and was priced first at sixpence; then, the sale being inconsiderable, at a shilling, which greatly encouraged the sale; and so, slowly, up to half a crown, at which the price of each number finally rested. As the advertisement of *Bells and Pomegranates* has never been reprinted, and as

that volume is not very common, I make no apology for reproducing that characteristic little document: —

"Two or three years ago I wrote a play, about which the chief matter I much care to recollect at present is, that a pitfull of good-natured people applauded it. Ever since, I have been desirous of doing something in the same way that should better reward their attention. What follows I mean for the first of a series of dramatical pieces, to come out at intervals, and I amuse myself by fancying that the cheap mode in which they appear will for once help me to a sort of pit-audience again. Of course, such a work must go on no longer than it is liked; and to provide against a certain and but too possible contingency, let me hasten to say now what, if I were sure of success, I would try to say circumstantially enough at the close, that I dedicate my best intentions most admiringly to the author of *Ion*, — most affectionately to Serjeant Talfourd."

There had been nothing in the pastoral kind written so delightfully as *Pippa Passes* since the days of the Jacobean dramatists. It was inspired by the same feeling as gave charm and freshness to the masques of Day and Nabbes, but it was carried out with a mastery of execution and fullness of knowledge such as those unequal writers could not dream of exercising. The figure of Pippa herself, the unconscious messenger of good spiritual tidings to so many souls in dark places, is one of the most beautiful that Mr. Browning has produced, and in at least one of the more serious scenes, — that between Sebald and Ottima, — he reaches a tragic height that places him on a level with the greatest modern dramatists. Of the lyrical interludes and seed-pearls of song scattered through the scenes, it is a commonplace to say that nothing

more exquisite or natural was ever written, or rather warbled. The public was first won to Mr. Browning by *Pippa Passes*. Next year, 1842, he printed the old tragedy of *King Victor and King Charles*, which he had had by him for some years. If *Pippa Passes* was, as Miss Barrett said, a pomegranate that showed

> "A heart within blood-tinctured, of a veined humanity,"

this latter drama was a bell, clear-toned and clangorous, fitly rung before the curtain should rise upon a stately theatrical spectacle. The poetry here, as in *Strafford*, which it resembles, is carefully subordinated to stage effect and movement, and it is unfortunate that Mr. Browning was not successful in getting it accepted by any manager, for it would be a popular piece on the stage. Not a lyrical passage, scarcely

a lyrical touch, checks the business and bustle of the scenes till Victor dies so majestically, with his son's crown on his head, defying d'Ormea. The same year followed the brief pamphlet or booklet called *Dramatic Lyrics*. Short as this book is, only sixteen pages, it was shorter still when the printer's devil came from Mr. Moxon's shop to ask for more copy to fill up the sheet. Mr. Browning gave him a *jeu d'esprit* which he had written to amuse little Willie Macready, and which he had had no idea of publishing. This was *The Pied Piper of Hamelin*, which has probably introduced its author's name into hundreds of thousands of homes where otherwise it never would have penetrated. In other respects the collection was sparse, but remarkable enough. First came the three "Cavalier Tunes," as at present; then, under

the titles of "Italy" and "France," what we now find among the *Dramatic Romances* as "My Last Duchess" and "Count Gismond." Then the "Incident of the French Camp" and "The Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister"; then "In a Gondola," perhaps the most delicate in harmonic effect of all Mr. Browning's lyrics; then "Artemis Prologizes"; then "Waring," in which was sung the disappearance of Mr. Alfred Dommett, who, after a long exile, returned from Vishnuland, or New Zealand, a few years ago; then "Rudel and the Lady of Tripoli," "Cristina," "Mad-house Cells," — which we have already discussed, — "Through the Metidja," and finally "The Pied Piper." Early in 1843 there followed the glowing and passionate tragedy *The Return of the Druses*, a play which would be sure to rivet attention on the stage, but

which no manager hitherto has had the courage to produce.

But, in the meantime, the hopes that had sprung eternal in the breasts of all dramatic poets began to cluster once more around the person of Mr. Macready. That illustrious actor, by that time recognized as by far the most able and eminent tragedian in the English-speaking world, after performing for a season at the Haymarket, took Drury Lane Theatre under his own management, and held out flattering promises to the poets. This season opened on the 10th of December, 1842, with *The Patrician's Daughter* of Mr. Westland Marston. This was the first work of a young man of great promise, of whom much had been talked in literary and theatrical circles. Mr. Macready took the part of Mordaunt, Miss Helen Faucit that of Lady Mabel Lynterne, and

great pains were taken to secure a thoroughly satisfactory cast. It was distinctly understood that if *The Patrician's Daughter* was a great success, the public was to be rewarded by a series of original tragedies by poets of repute. Everything seemed as glittering and auspicious as possible, and nobody knew what a dangerous game Macready was playing. He was, as a matter of fact, on the verge of bankruptcy, and driven almost to distraction by a variety of vexations. Unfortunately, Marston's play, from which so much was expected, enjoyed only a success of esteem. It was removed, to be succeeded on the boards by a play called *Plighted Troth*, by a brother of George Darley, and a man of the same peevish, hopeless temperament as his more distinguished relative. This tragedy proved to be miserable trash, and was scarcely endured

a single night. But, in the meantime, Mr. Browning, who had been asked by Macready to write a play for him, had devised and composed, in the space of five days, one of the most remarkable of his works, *A Blot in the 'Scutcheon*. This had been received, and delight had been expressed by Macready on reading it. The author was, therefore, surprised that, on the withdrawal of *Plighted Troth*, he received no invitation, in accordance with etiquette, to read it aloud to the actors previous to rehearsal. He had no inkling whatever of Macready's embarrassments, and not the slightest notion that it was hoped that he would withdraw the piece. At last, on Saturday, the 4th of February, 1843, Macready called Mr. Browning into his private room, and said to him: —

"Your play was read to the actors

yesterday, and they received it with shouts of laughter."

"Who read it?"

"Oh, Mr. Wilmot."

Now, Wilmot was the prompter, a broadly comic personage with a wooden leg and a very red face, whose vulgar sallies were the delight of all the idle jesters that hung about the theatre. That such a drama as *A Blot in the 'Scutcheon* should be given to Wilmot to read was simply an insult, and one of which Mr. Browning did not conceal his perception. Macready saw his mistake, and said: "Wilmot is a ridiculous being, of course. On Monday I myself will read it to the actors." On Monday, accordingly, he read it, but he announced to Mr. Browning that he should not act in it himself, but that Phelps, then quite a new man, would take the principal part. This was an

unheard-of thing in those days, when it was supposed that Macready was absolutely essential to a new tragedy. Of course his hope was that Mr. Browning would say: "You not play in it? Then, of course, I withdraw it." But the actor's manner was so far from suggesting that truth that the poet never suspected the real state of the case. He accepted Phelps, but, when the rehearsal began on Tuesday, Phelps was very ill with English cholera, and could not be present, so Macready read his part for him. On Wednesday Mr. Browning noticed that Macready was not merely reading: he was rehearsing the part, moving across the stage, and counting his steps. When Mr. Browning arrived on Thursday, there was poor Phelps sitting close to the door, as white as a sheet, evidently very poorly. Macready began: "As Mr. Phelps is

so ill — you are very ill, are you not, Mr. Phelps? — it will be impossible for him to master his part by Saturday; and I shall therefore take it myself." Mr. Browning was not at all pleased with this shuffling, for which he could divine no cause, and he was still more annoyed at the changes which were being made in the poem. The title was to be changed to "The Sisters," the first act was to be cut out, and it was to end without any tragic *finale*, but with these sublime lines, due to the unaided genius of Macready himself:

"Within a monastery's solitude,
Penance and prayer shall wear my life away."

Mr. Browning was determined, if possible, to check this wanton sacrifice of the poem, and so he took the MS. to his publisher Moxon, who also had a quarrel with Macready, and who was therefore only too pleased to coöper-

ate in his confusion. *A Blot in the 'Scutcheon* was printed in a few hours, in a single sheet, as part five of *Bells and Pomegranates*, and was in the hands of each of the actors before Mr. Browning reached the theatre on Friday morning. As he entered, he met Phelps, who was waiting for him at the door, and who said:

"It is true, sir, that I have been ill, but I am better now, and if you chose to give the part to me, which I can hardly expect you to do, I should be able to act it to-morrow night."

"But is it possible," said Mr. Browning, "that you could learn it so soon?"

"Yes," answered Phelps, "I should sit up all night and know it perfectly."

Mr. Browning's determination was soon taken; he took Phelps with him into the green-room, where Macready was already studying the play in its

printed form, with the actors around him. Mr. Browning stopped him, and said:

"I find that Mr. Phelps, although he has been ill, feels himself quite able to take the part, and I shall be very glad to leave it in his hands." Macready rose and said:

"But do you understand that I, *I*, am going to act the part?"

"I shall be very glad to intrust it to Mr. Phelps," said Mr. Browning, upon which Macready crumpled up the play he was holding in his hand, and threw it to the other end of the room.

After such an event, it was with no very hopeful feelings that Mr. Browning awaited the first performance on the next night, February 11th. He would not allow his parents or his sister to go to the theatre; no tickets were sent to him, but finding that the stage-box was

his, not by favor, but by right, he went with no other companion than Mr. Edward Moxon. But his expectations of failure were not realized. Phelps acted magnificently, carrying out the remark of Macready, that the difference between himself and the other actors was that they could do magnificent things now and then, on a spurt, but that he could always command his effects. Anderson, a *jeune premier* of promise, acted the young lover with considerable spirit, although the audience was not quite sure whether to laugh or no when he sang his song, "There 's a Woman like a Dewdrop," in the act of climbing in at the window. Finally, Miss Helen Faucit almost surpassed herself in Mildred Tresham. The piece was entirely successful, though Mr. R. H. Horne, who was in the front of the pit, tells me that Anderson was for some time only

half-serious, and quite ready to have turned traitor if the public had encouraged him. When the curtain went down, the applause was vociferous. Phelps was called and recalled, and then there rose the cry of "Author!" To this Mr. Browning remained silent and out of sight, and the audience continued to shout until Anderson came forward, and keeping his eye on Mr. Browning, said, "I believe that the author is not present, but if he is I entreat him to come forward!" The poet, however, turned a deaf ear to this appeal, and went home very sore with Macready, and what he considered his purposeless and vexatious schemings. *A Blot in the 'Scutcheon* was announced to be played "three times a week until further notice"; was performed with entire success to crowded houses, until the final collapse of Ma-

cready's schemes brought it abruptly to a close.

Such is the true story of an event on which Macready, in his journals, has kept an obstinate silence, and which one erring critic after another has chronicled as the failure, "as a matter of course," of Mr. Browning's "improbable" play. Neither on its first appearance, nor when Phelps revived it at Sadler's Wells, was *A Blot in the 'Scutcheon* received by the public otherwise than with warm applause. As in the case of *Strafford*, a purely accidental circumstance, unconnected with Mr. Browning, cut it short in the midst of a successful run.

Fired with the memory of so many plaudits, Mr. Browning set himself to the composition of another actable play, and this also had its little hour of success, though not until many years

afterward. *Colombe's Birthday*, which formed number six of *Bells and Pomegranates*, appeared in 1843. I have before me at the present moment a copy of the first edition, marked for acting by the author, who has written: "I made the alterations in this copy to suit some — I forget what — projected stage representation: not that of Miss Faucit, which was carried into effect long afterward." The stage directions are numerous and minute, showing the science which the dramatist had gained since he first essayed to put his creations on the boards. Some of the suggestions are characteristic enough. For instance, "unless a very good Valence" is found, this extremely fine speech, perhaps the jewel of the play, is to be left out. In the present editions the verses run otherwise. Valence speaks:

"He stands, a man, now; stately, strong and wise —
One great aim, like a guiding-star, before —
Which tasks strength, wisdom, stateliness to follow,
As, not its substance, but its shine, he tracks,
Nor dreams of more than, just evolving these
To fullness, will suffice him to life's end.
After this star, out of a night he springs,
A beggar's cradle for the throne of thrones
He quits; so mounting, feels each step he mounts,
Nor as from each to each exultingly
He passes, overleaps one grain of joy.
This for his own good: — with the world each gift
Of God and man — Reality, Tradition,
Fancy, and Fact — so well environ him,
That as a mystic panoply they serve —
Of force untenanted to awe mankind,
And work his purpose out with half the world,
While he, their master, dexterously slipt
From such encumbrance, is meantime employed
In his own prowess with the other half.
So shall he go on, every day's success
Adding, to what is He, a solid strength, —
An airy might to what encircles him,
Till at the last, so life's routine shall grow,
That as the Emperor only breathes and moves,

His shadow shall be watched, his step or stalk
Become a comfort or a portent; how
He trails his ermine take significance,—
Till even his power shall cease his power to be,
And not his weakness men shall fear, nor vanquish
Their typified invincibility.
So shall he go on greatening, till he ends—
The man of men, the spirit of all flesh,
The fiery centre of an earthy world!"

Mr. Browning says that very little has hitherto been printed about his life, and that little "mostly false." A curious instance of this last clause is the statement that has been authoritatively made, in a quarter from which we do not expect error, to the effect that *Colombe's Birthday* was brought out by Miss Cushman, at the Haymarket, in 1844, as *The Duchess of Cleves*. The editor of Mr. Browning's letters to Mr. R. H. Horne was probably thinking about a play, with a "Duchess" in

the title, written by Henry Chorley for Miss Cushman, which she brought out while Mr. Browning was in Italy. It seems to have been some projected performance of *Colombe's Birthday* in 1846, by Helen Faucit, to whom the poet had read his play, that caused the latter to make the stage directions to which I have just referred. In point of fact, it was not till 1852 that Miss Faucit produced, and with marked success, the play in question.

The last number of *Bells and Pomegranates*, which appeared in double size, contained a quaint rabbinical apology for the general title, and consisted of two plays, *Luria*, dedicated to Walter Savage Landor, and *A Soul's Tragedy*. These bore the date 1846, and with these the first act of Mr. Browning's public as well as private life would seem to have closed, for on the 12th of

September, 1846, he was married, at St. Marylebone, to Miss Elizabeth Barrett Barrett, the illustrious poet, and directly afterward proceeded with her to find a new home in Italy.

April, 1881.

PERSONAL IMPRESSIONS

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THOSE who have frequently seen our revered and beloved friend during the past year will hardly join in the general chorus of surprise which has greeted the death of one so strong in appearance and so hale and green. Rather with these there will be a faint sort of congratulation that such a life, so manifestly waning in essential vigor, should have been spared the indignities of decline, the "cold gradations of decay." For a year past no close observer could have doubted that the robustness which seemed still invincible in the summer of 1888 was rudely shaken. Cold upon cold left the poet weaker; the recuperative power was rapidly and continuously

on the decrease. But a little while ago, and to think of Mr. Browning and of illness together seemed impossible. It is a singular fact that he who felt so keenly for human suffering had scarcely known, by experience, what physical pain was. The vigor, the exemption from feebleness, which marks his literary genius, accompanied the man as well. I recollect his giving a picturesque account of a headache he suffered from, once, in St. Petersburg, about the year 1834! Who amongst us is fortunate enough to remember his individual headaches? I seem to see him now, about six years ago, standing in the east wind on the doorstep of his house in Warwick Crescent, declaring with emphasis that he felt ill, really ill, more ill than he had felt for half a century, and looking all the while, in spite of that indisposition, a monument of sturdy

health. Even his decline has been the reluctant fall of a wholesome and well-balanced being. Painlessly, without intellectual obscuration, demanding none of that pity that he deprecated, he falls asleep in Italy, faint indeed, yet, to the very last, pursuing. Since those we love must pass away; since the light must sooner or later sink in the lantern, there is, perhaps, no better way than this. We may repeat of him what Sir Thomas Browne said of his friend, "We have missed not our desires in his soft departure, which was scarce an expiration."

It is natural in these first moments to think more of the man than of his works. The latter remain with us, and coming generations will comprehend them better than we do. But our memories of the former, though far less salient, have this importance — that they will

pass away with us. Every hour henceforward makes the man more shadowy. We must condense our recollections, if they are not to prove wholly volatile and fugitive. In these few pages, then, I shall mainly strive to contribute my pencil-sketch to the gallery of portraits which will be preserved. He was so many-sided that there may be room for any picture of him that is quite sincere and personal, however slight it may prove; and in the case of Mr. Browning, far more than of most men of genius, the portrait may be truly and boldly drawn without offense. There is no prominent feature of character which has to be slurred over, no trick or foible to be concealed. No man ever showed a more handsome face to private friendship, no one disappointed or repelled less, no one, upon intimate acquaintance, required less to be apologized for or explained away.

There have been many attempts to describe Mr. Browning as a talker in society. One of the best, from the pen of an accomplished observer, appeared last autumn in the *New Review*. But his private conversation was a very different thing from his talk over the dinner-table or in a picture-gallery. It was a very much finer phenomenon, and one which tallied far better with the noble breadth of his genius. To a single listener, with whom he was on familiar terms, the Browning of his own study was to the Browning of a dinner party as a tiger is to a domestic cat. In such conversation his natural strength came out. His talk assumed the volume and the tumult of a cascade. His voice rose to a shout, sank to a whisper, ran up and down the gamut of conversational melody. Those whom he was expecting will never forget his welcome, the loud trumpet-note from

the other end of the passage, the talk already in full flood at a distance of twenty feet. Then, in his own study or drawing-room, what he loved was to capture the visitor in a low armchair's "sofa-lap of leather," and from a most unfair vantage of height to tyrannize, to walk around the victim, in front, behind, on this side, on that, weaving magic circles, now with gesticulating arms thrown high, now grovelling on the floor to find some reference in a folio, talking all the while, a redundant turmoil of thoughts, fancies, and reminiscences flowing from those generous lips. To think of it is to conjure up an image of intellectual vigor, armed at every point, but overflowing, none the less, with the geniality of strength.

The last time that the present writer enjoyed one of these never-to-be-forgotten talks was on the earliest Sunday

in June last summer. For the first time since many years Mr. Browning was in Cambridge, and he was much fêted. He proposed a temporary retreat from too full society, and we retired alone to the most central and sequestered part of the beautiful Fellows' Garden of Trinity. A little tired and silent at first, he was no sooner well ensconced under the shadow of a tree, in a garden-chair, than his tongue became unloosed. The blue sky was cloudless above, summer foliage hemmed us round in a green mist, a pink mountain of a double-may in blossom rose in front. We were close to a hot shrub of sweetbriar that exhaled its balm in the sunshine. Commonly given to much gesticulation, the poet sat quite still on this occasion; and, the perfect quiet being only broken by his voice, the birds lost fear and came closer and

closer, curiously peeping. So we sat for more than two hours, and I could but note what I had had opportunity to note before, that although, on occasion, he could be so accurate an observer of nature, it was not instinctive with him to observe. In the blaze of summer, with all the life of birds and insects moving around us, he did not borrow an image from or direct an allusion to any natural fact about us.

He sat and talked of his own early life and aspirations; how he marvelled, as he looked back, at the audacious obstinacy which had made him, when a youth, determine to be a poet and nothing but a poet. He remarked that all his life long he had never known what it was to have to do a certain thing to-day and not to-morrow; he thought this had led to superabundance of production, since, on looking back, he could

see that he had often, in his unfettered leisure, been afraid to do nothing. Then, with complete frankness, he described the long-drawn desolateness of his early and middle life as a literary man; how, after certain spirits had seemed to rejoice in his first sprightly runnings, and especially in *Paracelsus*, a blight had fallen upon his very admirers. He touched, with a slight irony, on "the entirely unintelligible *Sordello*," and the forlorn hope of *Bells and Pomegranates*. Then he fell, more in the habitual manner of old men, to stories of early loves and hatreds, Italian memories of the forties, stories with names in them that meant nothing to his ignorant listener. And, in the midst of these reminiscences, a chord of extreme interest to the critic was touched. For in recounting a story of some Tuscan nobleman who had

shown him two exquisite miniature-paintings, the work of a young artist who should have received for them the prize in some local contest, and who, being unjustly defrauded, broke his ivories, burned his brushes, and indignantly forswore the thankless art for ever. Mr. Browning suddenly reflected that there was, as he said, "stuff for a poem" in that story, and immediately with extreme vivacity began to sketch the form it should take, the suppression of what features and the substitution of what others were needful; and finally suggested the non-obvious or inverted moral of the whole, in which the act of spirited defiance was shown to be, really, an act of tame renunciation, the poverty of the artist's spirit being proved in his eagerness to snatch, even though it was by honest merit, a benefit simply material. The poet said, distinctly, that

he had never before reflected on this incident as one proper to be versified; the speed, therefore, with which the creative architect laid the foundations, built the main fabric, and even put on the domes and pinnacles of his poem was, no doubt, of uncommon interest. He left it, in five minutes, needing nothing but the mere outward crust of the versification. It will be a matter of some curiosity to see whether the poem so started and sketched was actually brought to completion.

It cannot have escaped the notice of any one who knew Robert Browning well, and who compares him in thought with other men of genius whom he may have known, that it was not his strength only, his vehement and ever-eruptive force, that distinguished him, but to an almost equal extent his humanity. Of all great poets, except (one fancies)

Chaucer, he must have been the most accessible. It is almost a necessity with imaginative genius of a very high order to require support from without: sympathy, admiration, amusement, must be constantly poured in to balance the creative evaporation. But Mr. Browning demanded no such tribute. He rather hastened forward with both hands full of entertainment for the new-comer, anxious to please rather than hoping to be pleased. The most part of men of genius look upon an unknown comer as certainly a bore and probably an enemy, but to Robert Browning the whole world was full of vague possibilities of friendship. No one resented more keenly an unpleasant specimen of humanity, no one could snub more royally at need, no one was — certain premises being established — more ruthless in administering the *coup de grâce;* but then his

surprise gave weight to his indignation. He had assumed a new acquaintance to be a good fellow, and behold! against all ordinary experience, he had turned out to be a bore or a sneak. Sudden, irreparable chastisement must fall on one who had proved the poet's optimism to be at fault. And, to those who shared a nearer intimacy than genial acquaintanceship could offer, is there one left to-day who was disappointed in his Browning or had any deep fault to find with him as a friend? Surely, no! He was human to the core, red with the warm blood to the centre of his being; and if he erred, as he occasionally did — as lately, to the sorrow of all who knew him, he did err — it was the judgment not the instinct that was amiss. He was a poet, after all, and not a philosopher.

It was part of Mr. Browning's large

optimism, of his splendid and self-sufficing physical temperament, that he took his acquaintances easily — it might almost be said superficially. His poetic creations crowded out the real world to a serious extent. With regard to living men and women he was content to speculate, but with the children of his brain the case was different. These were not the subjects of more or less indolent conjecture, but of absolute knowledge. It must be ten years ago, but the impression of the incident is as fresh upon me as though it happened yesterday, that Mr. Browning passed from languid and rather ineffectual discussion of some persons well known to us both into vivid and passionate apology for an act of his own Colombe of Ravenstein. It was the flash from conventionality to truth, from talk about people whom he hardly seemed to see to a record of a soul that he had formed and could fol-

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